Communication and Relationships

Andrew Bloomfield

Communication and Relationships:
by a man who types to talk

Andrew Bloomfield

Guelph, 2014

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Introduction

I am writing this book because now that it is known, or at least accepted by some, that autistics can communicate, I want to get down to what matters. **What matters is that our quality of life depends upon good relationships.** I know that most people believe that autistics cannot have real relationships. The truth is that we can if the circumstances are right. I want to share with anyone who reads this the ways I have been able to connect with the people in my life. To connect with someone and make a friendship, I need time to get to know him or her. I need to know that the person believes I am smart like anyone.

In my autobiography ***Bridges over barriers in my life with autism*** (2011) I reflected on my first 43 years. I wanted to make sense of what has happened in my life and to be clear about the most important things that must continue. I concluded that I needed to "focus on my future. I learned from remembering my past life but now I am a man. Now it is time to look to the future... I am happy I can think about the past and feel good about it. I have grown and become the man I know I am meant to be... I need space and chances to do things for myself. New people in my life will always need to learn how to balance supporting me and being a bridge to help me connect myself to others. This is sometimes hard for people to get. You don't need to carry me over the bridge, just walk by my side" (p.119).

I had the idea of this new book in June 2013 and have composed passages from time to time over 18 months. Why this book now? Who will want to read it? Several kinds of people show interest in my different abilities and challenges.

A big factor in my thoughts about the present and future is my need to prepare myself for life without my parents. I want to lead my own life and continue making the key decisions. For that I should keep learning about my options. I want to do everything I can for myself. I want to be independent but not alone. I need to be interdependent and connected. It's important that the people in my life know how to listen to me and understand how best to support me, including how I get to know new supporters and friends. At the end of this small book there is a summary of the most important things to know about me. I also include a new meditation and a note of the ideas in my painting "Rhythm of Life".

I am blessed to have wonderful friends including directors of my Aroha who have made a commitment to support my good life. They respect me and listen to me. They discuss with me new ways to enjoy life, stretch my mind and connect with new people who can become friends. It seems a good idea to explain how I communicate and the best circumstances for me to connect with new people.

I care about my Bridges-Over-Barriers friends who also use Supported Typing. Some of them think of writing their own stories and I want to encourage them. Jenn Seybert, an American woman who also types to

talk, recently pioneered the idea of "being the driver of my own communication training". She composed her own story of how she expresses herself and what helps best. She and her assistants also made a video of the ways she is supported to communicate. That seems a good model for Bridges members wanting to be self-advocates.

Composing this book has been a special project with my friend Beth who has been my communication mentor since March 2000. This book is dedicated to all who have ever supported me to communicate and to all my friends who listen, believe in me and help me to realize the hopes and dreams I express.

I thank other friends who helped me to put this little book together:
Judi has supported my typing since July 2009;
Lea has introduced me to Clean Language and nature metaphors;
Heidi, my art mentor, helps me to express my ideas in paint;
Dean took the photo of me with Yukon;
Marie designed the cover;
Sarah reviewed the manuscript;
Elizabeth & Gerry facilitate my good whole life.

Andrew Bloomfield
Guelph, Ontario
5 December 2014

Communicating my way

My communication abilities have not always been what they are now. I do not want to dwell on the past but I can certainly say parents, teachers, supporters and friends should never give up on finding a way to give someone without a voice a means to communicate.

I am the writer of my words not with a pen but with my fingertips. It is important people know it is me with these rare and unique words. They are my thoughts, feelings and ideas on how I see the world. It is a relief to share these ideas with others. The words get stuck in my head and I need to compose them into a story of sorts because that is how I share my ideas. With my encouraging supporters I am able to get the thoughts to trickle from my brain to my fingertips. I am grateful people take the time to listen to my words. I think you will find them interesting and thought-provoking. It is important to listen. You may be surprised at what you may hear. Life is always changing and my words change with my experiences. We grow this way. Take a moment to read and listen. It will increase your experience also. I love to share this with all my friends who believe in me.

Memories of losing my voice

I did speak some words with my own voice when I was very young. My parents say that I did not babble or use baby talk, just uttered some

meaningful words very clearly. Then I stopped talking when I was 5 when I was away from home weekdays at a special school. My memories of this time are awakened by hearing about other people who could not speak but later learned to communicate and show they are intelligent. One was Annie McDonald of Melbourne, Australia with whom Rosemary Crossley first developed Facilitated Communicating (FC) in the late 1970s. Annie was able to convince a High Court Judge that she could make decisions about her own life and should be let out of the institution where she had been confined for more than 10 years.

I think a lot about how Annie must have felt being locked away like that. I am grateful I could walk and run and say something before I turned inside out. My words went back inside. I was not able to say what I thought without rethinking it over several hundred times in my head. I do not like to remember how hellish that felt. It was like my words were being taken from me and my body could not speak them, just see them in my mind over and over again. It was a long time ago when I was a young boy who wanted to say things but the mind and the mouth were not working together. The days when I felt most alone in myself were the days I could no longer say hello to you and it was there in my head but the words would be a jumbled up mess. The signing helped but it was as if I was just repeating things, not real communication like when I began to spell the words again. It would have been terrible to have spent my lifetime unable to share my thoughts and ideas. Just like my poem "What it's like to be me", I likely would have exploded.

The many ways I communicate

I am not the same every day or with everyone. While I express myself most eloquently and reliably in Supported Typing, I communicate in other ways as well. I can smile and I can sign and point and tap you on the arm. Here are some examples. When I am in a terrible mood I might stamp my foot or hit my chest or head with my fists. It usually means I am struggling with a problem in my body. People also say that I communicate with a look and a smile. But it can be hard to make my face do this in the moment when I want to be friendly. When people visit my home or I meet them out in the community I may put out my hand to shake hands and try to say Hello or wave to say Goodbye later.

You may think you can tell what I am thinking and feeling from my behaviour. You may think that if I leave the room when you are there that your presence is not welcome. But if you wait a little, I will be back. Or if I meet you out, I may not be able to organize my movements or facial muscles in time to put out my hand or smile or even look at you. But appearances may be deceiving. What you think you see is not all that's there. You might see me stop and think I don't want to do something. In reality my body is probably stuck or distracted. New people need to believe in me and be prepared to discover I may not be like they expect. That is one reason for this new book—to suggest positive ways of meeting and relating so we are all comfortable with a social situation.

Clicking and signing for basic needs

When I was very young, I worked out some ways of getting my parents' attention that continue to be useful. I would tap them on the shoulder or arm or sometimes take their hand to lead them to a place or thing. I still click my tongue to indicate that I need something. Since I lost my speech, this can be useful. We can click with an upward inflection (as a kind of question) or downward (as if to say I'm okay). Clicking has become important in communicating with my dogs since I cannot give them verbal commands. When I need my dog to attend to me, I click. For example, I click to tell him to sit when we are stopping at a curb to see that it is safe to cross a street.

If I want to say I need something, I can often sign. I first learned Signed Exact English when I was about 6. It was then thought that sign language might become the way that non-speaking children with Autism could talk to one another and their carers. I still know hundreds of signs but what good is knowing how to sign something like lion or elephant if I am not going to need that? I need to use a sign frequently to be able to use it spontaneously. The other challenge is that most people in the world don't know many signs. If the people in my life know the 20 or so signs I use most often that is enough for me.

I often use the signs for Eat, Drink, Water, Tea, More, Quiet, Please, Thanks, Hello, Goodbye, Toilet, Bed, Bath, Dress, Shoes, Coat, Walk,

Run, Friend, Work, Light, TV, Computer, Blanket, Sleep, Yukon, Go, Keep Going, Wait, Type, Read, Work, Car, Rain, Snow. Stop is an important word in my sign vocabulary as is Finished. I know the sign for Sorry but I don't think I use it. I do type it with Supported Typing if I feel I did something wrong.

While I know the signs for Yes and No, the problem is that I automatically sign No in response to many requests. I think I do this because it became a habit early in my life. It was scary to do things other people asked and I learned they left me alone if I said No. I more often will sign Yes if the question doesn't start with "Will you....." or "Do you want to....." I will say Yes if people say things like "It is time to eat. Please could you get the glasses or the cutlery?" The word "let's" is more encouraging and also tells me it will be done together if I need help. With Supported Typing I use Yes and No much more reliably.

Supported Typing is the way I express myself most deeply and reliably. It is a method of communication that changed my life and a central part of my relationship with other autistic friends. It is difficult to describe because it is harder than it looks. To see me typing with a communication partner, it looks like my hand is being moved. But I am moving it and the facilitator is supporting my erratic movements. I am not consistent in regulating my movements, so stabilizing my hand is important. Sharing a conversation with me and actually trying out the

kind of physical and emotional support I need is the best way to understand.

Supported Typing (ST) is a form of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) through which I and others have shown that, though we cannot speak with our voices, we possess a capacity for language and communication. I am a member of a group of communicators called Bridges-Over-Barriers; we share our struggles and strategies and ideas for self-advocacy.

We were helped to get going by experienced facilitators who stabilize our body and typing arm so we can type on computerized devices with voice output that speak our words and record what we say. I now use a laptop running WriteOutloud programs, a LightWriter designed by Toby Churchill and an iPad. I really like a device with a voice. Some people are happy without that and may use simple letterboards. More important than the devices are the attitudes of those who support us to talk by typing. They stabilize our bodies with their physical support but also encourage us by believing that we have something to say.

With the right kinds of support, we can co-ordinate our movements better and type our thoughts and feelings in words that other people understand. One key form of support is that the facilitator provides backward pressure so the communicator can concentrate on reaching forward to press the keys he intends to spell out his words. The form of support given by a facilitator varies with each communicator and has

been likened to learning to dance together. I have several facilitators and have developed slightly different ways of relating to each just as they adapt their support to the various people they may assist.

I want people to know that Supported Typing is not just a fun part of my life, or a novelty act like the dancing monkey. I think people are excited to see iPads and talking devices but that's not the same as really listening and believing me. I think the relationships in my life that help me move forward are those that give me opportunities to really speak with ST. I think that there are many ways of listening to me. My typed words that are the most detailed expressions come in conversation with only a few people. But many in my life listen to those words (or read the record) and take my choices and wishes seriously. Conversations with my Aroha (Friends of Andrew Bloomfield or FAB) and my Housing Trust (Guelph Services for the Autistic or GSA) are examples of good listening to my thoughts. Bridges is another level of listening because we accept each other even when talking is hard.

Many factors affect my ability to express myself. The weather, my food intake, my fears or worries, your mood, my brain chemistry; these are all elements that come into play for my successful communication and interactions. If my friends and supporters are aware and sensitive and skilled navigators of the different currents of my life, we can travel together. I need people to be good at putting my hopes and wishes into real time. The quality my most trusted friends have is using their gifts to

take my desires and make them happen or even better help me to make them happen. I suppose some might see me as just dependent on others and they are saintly to give me what I wish. But I think my relationships are rich and interdependent because we exchange ideas, learn from each other, and care about each other.

My parents have been exceptional role models for me in showing how to care and express love for others. As a family we reach out in many ways when others are unwell or if they need support in various ways. G and E are good citizens and friends. Being a good citizen means not just sitting and watching the news but doing things like collating things for causes I am passionate about, or recycling things to keep them out of landfill, or giving money to help improve things in the world.

My friends can help me learn about things and write letters to the editor or get involved in new things that matter. I need Supported Typing to learn new things. I often copy-type material to learn what the text is saying. Then we can talk about the ideas. For example I have done online courses in various subjects such as psychology, nature and communication and hope to do more. I use Supported Typing also to keep in touch with friends by mail or email and am presently exploring how to have virtual gatherings using the Internet when we cannot travel to talk together in the same room.

For the past 14 years I have said something like this: "The more I communicate the more I think!" For most of this time I have composed

poetry using Supported Typing. Why poetry? It's physically hard to express my thoughts through typing. You'd think I might be happy with the most basic texting. But I love words and think and feel in images. I first composed poetry when one of my friends started setting my words to music, so a sense of rhythm must come in too. Perhaps I use poetry to get people's attention, as I tend to be overlooked as a non-speaking person. Above all, I want and need people to listen, pay attention and see that I am an intelligent, determined and hopeful man.

My right to communicate and be believed

Words come in many ways and I share mine with Supported Typing and my face and body. Communication does not need to be the same for everyone. You need to listen to be sure you are hearing all the messages with both your eyes and ears. I make my decisions with the support of my friends and family and I need to have them to make sure I am heard correctly. I need to hear from others to help make an informed decision but the end result is what I want and need. Of course sometimes my decisions may be based on fear to try, so I need to be encouraged to keep on.

Having an outlet to talk had an impact on me and my friends. Being able to talk on ipads and keyboards sometimes seems more important than what we actually say. Sometimes what we say is confusing and needs to be unraveled, but our lives are better if we have the opportunity to try

to get our thoughts out. Other people can look at how our lives have changed since ST has been in our lives. We stay put longer and listen closely to others and are more able to participate in what life has to offer. I wish that people could see this is a way of proving we need to have access to the form of communication that works for us. When I myself am in a good relationship where my friend or supporting person is listening, I am better able to talk. When my voice is heard I am able to access it better.

I prefer to have only believers, people who believe my words are my own, working closely with me. They do not all have to be able to provide the facilitation for me, however. It is vital that there be someone who not only believes I am an intelligent human being but also keeps me moving forward. I think we have the tendency to get stuck with our ability to communicate, and we get stuck in routines.

I want to tell people that I have intelligence. But if they are looking for easy proof, just look at how different we are now. Communicating my way is an essential part of me. Recently I composed this statement of my communication and decision-making rights to be quoted in a public lecture at the University of Waterloo:

I am the Author of my story. I need always to have my voice heard. Even though it is a light tap of the keys rather than a loud sounding voice from my mouth, it is powerful and full of meaning. When we cannot talk in

one way or another, we lose our cool and get very angry or frustrated. I need to have my way to communicate or I will explode.

To be seen and heard and believed to be intelligent adults, and not disabled children, makes a difference in how we see ourselves. I pick up on your attitudes and perceptions. If I am with people who convey they do not believe I have the ability to talk, then I lose my own confidence and prove their disbelief.

You can look at how our lives have changed since we have been given a way to express our thoughts and words. We are people that experts said do not like to be touched and we allow our bodies and typing arms to be supported and stabilized. We are people that experts said have short attention spans to tasks but I stay in a conversation for two hours. We can listen closely to others and are more able to participate in what life has to offer.

I am the Author of my words. Never give up on finding a way to give someone without a voice a means to communicate. We have a lot of catching up to do since many of us have been effectively mute a large part of our lives. You need to listen and make sure you are hearing all the messages with both your eyes and ears.

It is my decision because it is my life to live. I need to hear from others to make an informed decision but the end result is what I need and want. I

make my decisions with the support of my friends and family. I need to have them to make sure I am heard correctly.

I am the Author of my life. I dream to be free. I dream to be me. My hope is to give others hope. I am a man who was behind the cement walls of a prison imposed by a system that could not see people's potential. If I can now talk to others like intelligent people do, then most any dream can come true!

What matters is the quality of our relationships

The hardest part of living with Autism is that people often do not realize that we really want and need friends. The word Autism suggests we prefer to be alone. Sometimes we need to get away when being with people may be noisy and confusing. But we need good friends above all—people who care about us, listen to and respect us, and share their lives and interests with us. I am blessed with many wonderful friends. I need different kinds of people in my life. I am glad I can tell them I appreciate their friendship. Some friends introduce me to their friends. Sometimes people who meet in my life become friends with each other.

Because I don't speak and cannot easily smile, it seems good to set down my thoughts about how I meet and get to know new people and how I keep in touch with people I have known for longer.

Different people in my life

AB 19 Nov 2011

I have people who are strong and bold:
they are like pillars
in the bridge of my life.
I have people who are gentle
and kind with a soft heart to
give me encouragement to try:
they are the bricks
in the bridge of my life.
I have people in my life
who are there when I need them—
dependable, respectable, kind people
who respond when I need their help.

People have opinions of
who I am and who I should be.
But the people in my life who matter
are people who give me
the chance to be me.

I need to be encouraged
and given the motivation
to use my determination
but I also need to be given
time and patience to make
a change or mistake.

The people in my life help me
overcome the things in life
that could leave me in the water.
I don't like to just swim.
I like to walk over the bridge.

I need each of these
unique and wonderful people.
The bricks and the pillars
build the strength of my bridge
to pass over when I need it.

I need different people in my life.
I am me because each person
allows me to be me.
The different people in my life
make me wholly me.

Getting to know new people

Let's start with how I get to know non-autistics. I think it is important for me to know why anyone is coming to see me. I think I need to know what category of person you are. Are you coming because you are my neighbour and want to be my friend? Are you here because you might like to be one of my running partners? Are you interested in my home and my good life? Are you interested in being one of my support team? The reason it is important for me to know these things is it helps me prepare psychologically. I have the kind of brain that needs advance information to prepare myself. Surprises are my worst enemy.

The best people I know who live by this are E and G, my parents. They always share this kind of information with me when new people are coming to my home. Choice is also important. Do I want to meet these people, or go somewhere else in in my house? There are unexpected visitors at times but with support I can usually at least greet them. Sometimes we make a plan when someone new is coming. We may plan a walk, with my dog Yukon of course, or a game I know how to play, and enjoying a cup of tea and rice cake with almond butter. I can get to know a person while doing something I am familiar with and enjoy. If all goes well I would like to demonstrate my ability to communicate.

I have had great experiences meeting new friends who share interests. About a year ago I added two new men to my running team. I had never

met them before so we made a plan. The plan was I would take them each on a walk to the park. When the first guy came, we did the walk. He had told me in a call about himself. I didn't get to know him well yet but it was a good start. The thing that was great was that I did show him my Supported Typing. I think it worked because I knew he was there to run and not test me. He did come again fairly soon after and we tried a short run. I felt safe since he had come before. I stopped running sometimes but I think it went okay. Better the next time though. I did get stuck each time but that was not because he is new to me. I get stuck with everyone. It was good that he listened to E for ideas how to get me to keep moving.

Of course a relationship works both ways. New people need some help in getting to know me. I think the thing people can learn from me is that appearances can be deceiving. They might see me stop running and think I don't want to do it. In reality my body is probably stuck or distracted. What does work is being extremely positive and encouraging, even putting a firm touch on my back to facilitate my moving forward again. We tried my metronome and I wore it in a pouch. It was not very loud but I think it helped. We started the same way with the second man. If the person is open to trying things it is bound to work. I think that it is important to observe and learn from me when people are willing to try new things.

Another important thing for me with new people is that they need to believe in me. They should be prepared to discover I may not be like they expect. If I sense they are paternalistic or patronizing, I will be distressed. I can get past it if I feel they mean well, I can prove myself if I think they will be able to have their eyes opened.

My ability to take support from new people needs to grow slowly. It helps when a new person is kind and listens well. Being with a new support worker helps me practice for a homesharer. I am ready to meet anyone who is a good candidate.

In the past I had some pretty dismal experiences which taught me and my parents how to do the first meetings better. I can recall workers who came and they did not get enough information about me and we did not have a well-planned first meeting.

Someone who came from far away thought she was here to be my babysitter. She could not believe that my intelligence was greater than she anticipated. We had shared information such as my films and words and one of our friends did a phone interview in the person's language. But we did not meet her before she moved in. My thought is that we need to test attitudes in advance with a questionnaire. I think that we did not plan the first meeting in detail. We had to make a commitment before she arrived. I knew she was coming but we did not carry out a detailed script.

I recall a music teacher who was very rigid about his methods. He wanted to do music therapy and have me play instruments before I really knew him. He had a specific way of doing things. I really don't think he was interested in a relationship but a music therapy job. I tolerated him but he did not really respond to our input. Another man just wanted to take me swimming and did not really see me as a person.

I have learned that the key is to convey that I am not interested in being cared for, as by a nanny. Support is a different thing altogether. I know it is work in the sense there is pay but an artist hopes to be paid for doing what she loves. I want to be around people who love their time sharing interests while supporting me in my good life.

I don't like the principle that another person or agency is choosing support workers for me. If this has to be, I must give clear and complete information about myself in advance. I like to provide people with my biography and tell them about how our first meeting will be planned. We should ask them to send me a letter telling me about themselves. They can view books and films about me and the values of my life.

I have had some good experiences with people I already knew who stayed in my home as homesharers so I could get used to how this feels. These experiences showed me how someone who is genuinely interested in me can become a homesharer. Several of us interviewed one person together and I said what I liked. And it worked out well.

My circle of close friends

I want to talk about relationships with my circle of friends. My close family and friends are the foundation for my good life. They are grouped in different categories. E and G are connected to each of my different groups of friends.

My Aroha is the group of friends who have made me a promise to stand by me in my future life. Aroha is a native word in New Zealand. It means hope and love always in our world. For me it means hope and support in my life. My Aroha friends are interested in me and listen to what I hope for in my life. They meet with us and talk and even laugh together. But the point is to know me deeply and help to make sure my good life continues. Even after the death of my parents.

The people in my Aroha have known me for a very long time. They have seen our efforts and have been nearby for good times and bad. They spend time with me in my home. We connect over meals and movies and games and even hikes. Some of my Aroha know how to use Supported Typing and some are hoping to learn one day. I need to know that people will be able to support my typing for the rest of my life. Even if they cannot use the technique, they believe in my words and they ARE my words!! I have told them in my books and my other written statements what I want for my life and even my desire not to be on life

support. I have given them my power of attorney so they need to be good listeners and I am grateful that they are.

I have other close friends in addition to those who are Aroha directors. Some support me and listen to me more frequently but have not signed up for life. The Aroha friends made a formal promise to me but there are others who also care about me forever. Some friends have been in my life for a very long time and I can talk to them about anything.

I have friends who facilitate so I can talk about my most important thoughts and feelings, including some friends who have stood by me for decades and others who are newer. Many factors made these relationships possible. First, they took time to get to know me. I had a chance to get to know them with no pressure to perform. I recall that the ways were different for different people and in different settings. Nowadays it is usually done in in my home. I believe I need to feel safe and at home and familiar with the surroundings to get to know someone. This is true of friends who do Supported Typing and friends who are just supportive.

To start a new friendship it has to be in a safe and familiar place. I need to know that, even if you push me to go somewhere new with a new skill, or to create a new door for me to go through, you will stick with me. It means that you have the will and ability to encourage me and you give me the support I need both physically for my typing and emotional support for the times I am too hyper or too stuck. I need friends who are

willing to be with me when I need encouragement to keep going. Those are the friends I know are forever.

Believing in me

AB 4 Apr 2012

It cannot be understated
how much I need you to believe in me.
My wiring can detect it
if you have doubts
and if you have reservations.
I know what it means to get bad vibes
and I get bad vibes
if you doubt my abilities,
if you doubt I am the author of my words.

I need you to believe in me,
or I might lose faith in myself.
I need you to send me
messages of encouragement
so I can keep up my mental state.
I will try not to disappoint you,
I will try to show you who I am.
But believe in me
and I have a better chance to do so.

I try to be a good friend to all in my circle. We host dinners at my home and I make cards for their birthdays. I try to help out in their hard times too. My parents and I reach out with love when there is sickness or hard times. I also like to write poems about special people in my life. That could be considered a gift, I suppose. I give my books of poetry to people I care for. It is my way of saying thanks for being in my life.

Bridges friends

I have a very special group of friends who, like me, use typing to talk. We met first in early 2004 when two Toronto men visited to talk to me on our letter boards and computers. One was someone I knew already and one was new to me. We were all very nervous but managed to talk. It was amazing having a conversation with other typers. It gave me a feeling I could share with others more like me. It was the beginning of what later became Bridges-Over-Barriers. The name of our group was meant to convey that our words and our relationships could help us build bridges over the obstacles people seemed to think we could not overcome. It was a positive way of restating that we could do things rather than the belief that we could not.

This group is now much larger and we have been meeting for more than ten years. We talk about issues in our lives and share ideas. We console each other in hard times and cheer each other on in good times. They have all become my dear friends and their parents and workers all

support us. Over the years we have become more comfortable with each other and are able to talk for long stretches of time. We often talk for over an hour and have a break for lunch and a walk, and then we talk for another hour. It has gotten easier because we have a way of running it so it is a similar format each time. It is now important to us to talk to accept each other and we are patient with each other's needs.

Song of Hope for Bridges

AB 3 Nov 2010

We are many and we are one:
The bridges that connect us are
our minds and our bodies that
others sometimes find hard to accept.
Together we find acceptance.
Together we find hope.
Together we find community.

We are many and we are one:
The bridges that connect us are
our words and our feelings
though they flow from our fingertips
and not our lips.
Together we find acceptance.
Together we find hope.

Together we find community.

We are many and we are one:
The bridges that connect us are
our family and friends
who help us interact
with each other and the world.
Together we are acceptance.
Together we are hope.
Together we are community.

My relationship with my Bridges friends has deepened. We type to talk but we also communicate our deep caring for each other simply by being together. Our communication is with words but also non- verbal. I know we are communicating love and acceptance to one another. We feel a comfort with each other and convey our thoughts in our minds. Words are not always necessary although talking on our devices is of course the foundation for our communication. We speak the most complex thoughts with our Supported Typing. In settings where people just ask us Yes and No questions, our deepest thoughts are not accessed. In our Bridges gatherings we start with the assumption we are all smart and can communicate complex thoughts.

Autistic people who speak

My relationship with verbal autistics can be challenging. There are people I know who can talk with their voices but what they say is limited to practical things. I know they are as smart as me but the Autism is keeping the complex thoughts inside. I want to be able to talk to them more deeply but the lack of interesting topics bores me. I know they have also challenges with the environment and understanding the way non-autistics think.

It is much harder to have a good conversation than with my Bridges friends who also type to talk. Sometimes we find middle ground with games or an activity but this is superficial compared to my friends who use Supported Typing. I know that I can care deeply about my autistic verbal friends too but I want to hear what they really think. I read minds most clearly of people I am close to and especially when we are touching or sitting close by each other. I do not feel as emotionally connected to some of my verbal friends. I get only glimpses of their thoughts. If I were to tell them in that moment, the other people would have doubts. By other people I mean their parents or workers. They may think I am less smart because I don't talk with my voice.

I have the idea that by talking more easily verbal autistic people may be kept from accessing the deeper as well as higher thoughts that we express with Supported Typing. Because they talk nobody thinks to help

them to access and express higher and deeper thoughts. I know that almost everyone has deep thoughts. It is the old dangerous assumption that they don't think complex thoughts more than they express. We should not judge books by their cover. My feeling is that people should work with them to get to their deeper thoughts. Maybe by typing with some minor touch or having therapists help them to use their voices to really speak their minds. Clean Language is a kind of talk therapy that helps me sort out my ideas and make sense of what I mean. It could help others to discover symbols and metaphors in their unconscious minds to resolve their anxieties and clarify their goals.

I know that some people I have met with other disabilities can lack inhibitions and sometimes blurt out surprising things. I can accept that they mean no harm. I have problems only with the people who do not recognize the smart and intelligent people who use Supported Typing to talk.

Casual acquaintances

There are people I would describe as casual acquaintances--the people who work behind the counter at the bank or stand at the checkout in stores. I meet many people in my larger neighbourhood on walks or runs. At the University Library which I visit with G, staff and students are used to seeing me and Yukon. Most people smile at me or talk to my dog. They are often unsure how to talk to me. I mostly smile or have my

own thoughts because I forget about being social. "Hi" is learnable and smiling I can practice. But I do observe people sometimes chat about the weather or ask little questions. I worry that they think I am dumb if I do not speak, so I generally try to ignore the situation. This is probably something I could work on. However practice is hard because the factors change. Like they may be standing in a new place or sitting where I cannot see them well. So each time is a different situation for me. I think they expect that, since I cannot talk with my mouth, it is not nice to ask me questions.

I think there are some things they could say to acknowledge my presence and my intelligence. Here are some I can think of: "I hope you are having a nice day"; "My, your dog is handsome--I wish I could have a dog too"; "I wish you a good day"; "I sometimes see you running--that looks enjoyable"; "Your smile is very nice"; "You have such a beautiful garden." I should practice signing "Thank you" to nice comments.

If someone knows I type to talk, they could ask my companion if I could answer some question they have one day when I am typing. We have made cards that could give to people who show interest. Maybe a new card should be a new goal for me. To hand them a card that says "I am happy to see you. I understand what you say but I do not talk with my voice. If you want to know about how to communicate with me you can read my books."

This year we launched a new short dramatic film and booklet, ***Holding in the Storm***. Our friend Christine was the director-producer. The film was inspired by our Bridges group to help people in our communities to accept, understand and include those of us who seem different--because we do not speak, for example. When people we meet show interest in us, we can tell them about the film. The new film has been seen by many. Some of my neighbours attended the premiere events in Guelph. So did our Mayor Karen Farbridge, who then made a special Mayor's Award to me for making a difference in our community. She said that my story provides good lessons about connectivity. This was such a surprise and honour!

Relationships with my dogs

Dogs have been the most amazing and surprising new additions to my life in the past 30 years. Not only can my dog be my most constant friend; my dog can also make friends for me with people.

My early life was plagued by my apparent fear of dogs. I was not afraid of the actual dogs as much as of their barking catching me by surprise. The anxiety about the potential to meet a dog and be startled by the barking made me reluctant to go outdoors. I was encouraged by my twin sister Vickie to get acquainted with a dog and that began my new relationship with these most wonderful animals, all Golden Retrievers.

My first relationship with a dog was trying but I got used to his presence. I did not have him living with me at first, as my neighbour first shared him with me on walks. Later I was ready to have him move into our house. I liked him but was wary for a long time. We shared our love of walking. Angus was an older gentleman, less friendly and smiling than my later dogs. He was not too frisky which was good for me. But later I needed dogs who could keep up with me.

Zachary who joined our household in May 1991 was young, vigorous and adventurous and shared my life during a difficult but wonderful decade. He came into my life at the same time as Supported Typing. He was one of the pilgrims of those days. I want to talk about how I loved him. Vickie was also especially fond of him. We shared him. Zack was perhaps too friendly to be faithful to me all the time. If he were still here you would love him too. He would remind you of how funny I can be. I once told a joke about Zack supporting me to type when talking to teachers in Hamilton.

In 1999, Amy became my first trained service dog, provided by National Service Dogs. Amy was a wonderful friend till her death nearly 12 years later. She knew I needed her and took her job as friend seriously. I think that Amy was responsible for my being encouraged to do more for myself. She gave me hope that I could do things on my own because she was there to help. I loved my Amy. Just thinking about her makes me smile. I shared Amy with my friends. We did lots of things together like

music. I think my neighbours liked her and residents at The Elliott were very glad of our "pet therapy" visits.

Amy was a queen to the prince Yukon who came to succeed her in mid-2009. Amy trained Yukon in the routines of my home. For a while I had two dogs and the first one needed to train the second one. They became friends and that was sweet. People thought I was quite a sight walking my two handsome friends.

Yukon the youthful one

11 Nov 2009

Yukon came into my life
with energy and exuberance of youth.
He is full of life.
He brings me to a place of moving forward.
When I need him to ground me,
it is as if he knows.
He lies at my feet or next to me,
and I know I am connected
to the here and now.

He is loving and accepted by Amy
who is my history.
He is guided by her example
to watch over my future.

I am grateful to him for his presence
and the comfort he gives me.
With Amy or Yukon in my life,
I am never alone.

Yukon is a natural companion and best friend. He knew from the beginning that his role was to support me all the time. But he is still learning. He senses my mood, follows me around, and alerts people when I get into difficulties such as a seizure. He hasn't yet learned that I don't enjoy touching him as much as he likes to lick me. But I try. He is a loyal and faithful friend. He gives me the stability of his presence just by being there. He gives me hope to keep moving. I like him to wait for me when I am in a stuck position. If he stands close he gives me the extra support I need. I love our walks together.

Our communication bond has been different with each dog. Yukon has the best ability to sense my needs and he is such a good companion. My lack of need for touch made me not realize dogs want this to tell them they are loved. So I need to be reminded to pet them from time to time. I communicate with my dogs by including them in my routines. I feed them and they accompany me on walks. I rarely go places without Yukon. I hope he can run with me one day. I can now click my tongue and use a manual clicker on his leash to communicate with him even though I can't use words. I don't like touching but I know Yukon does. I think most people talk to me because they want to talk to us both.

Yukon is my friend maker. Yukon knows what I need and is faithful. He comes to me when I click. But I don't need to click. He knows when I need him and that he should stay with me.

I love my dogs like they are my family. They have all been loyal and faithful friends, in their own ways. The people in my life now need to like dogs or they are not going to fit in well. My dogs are friend makers. So some people can feel like approaching me if I have a beautiful golden walking with me. People may not know how to start a conversation with an autistic man but with a handsome dog there is a shared frame of reference.

I once thought that dogs were not friendly and I was a bit afraid of them. I think their friendly social behaviour made me feel anxious. I was not sure what to expect from them. What made a difference? The need for friends and to feel that, no matter what, they would be there for me. I think that when I am loud and run in the house this scares Yukon but he knows I need him to be there, not to fix it but be my friend. I don't think that I have ever had such a faithful friend as Yukon. I want Yukon to live on and on. Yukon will never retire. I think we never retire from life.

Most important things to know about me

Most of this book is about the good times in my life. Though I am unable to speak with my voice, I understand just about all that is said around me and use my speech-generating devices and communication supporters to reply. Almost half my time I also have to cope with other symptoms of my whole-body autism and epilepsy. These are just part of me and I get along pretty well with encouragement from my friends. You can help if you understand these things about me:

1. I love to live in and care for my own home and garden in Guelph. I prefer a calm, cool, green environment, books and classical music. Nature, green values and being a good citizen are precious qualities.

2. I need friends who listen, understand, accept and include me and set an example to others. My trained companion dogs are friends too. Friendship is a two-way street. I really care about you. As well as hearing you speak, I sense your moods and feelings. Your best gift to me is encouragement to pursue and reach my goals.

3. My disabilities mean that people may get the wrong ideas about my intelligence and empathy. It's important to support my self-expression and listen deeply to me.

4. I am passionate about continuing to learn. My brain craves nutrition. In 2014 I started taking online courses and have qualified as a

communication mentor. I value computers and software. After using WriteOutloud for about 15 years, I am starting on Kurzweil 3000. It is good for me to learn through more than one sense. When copy-typing, I take in the meaning through my eyes, fingertips and ears. Some of what I think I may express in my poetry. I also like to paint the ideas and images. I share my life through my Andrew's Bridges blog. We are experimenting with virtual meetings with my Bridges friends. I like to have conversations using Clean Language and nature metaphors.

5. I love to be healthy for which I need a special diet and supplements, a calm predictable way of life, good sleep, and lots of exercise including running and walking.

6. I prefer my environments and routines to be tidy and predictable. I have a passion for order. Change and new things can be hard to get used to. It helps to understand when some change is necessary and why. Then I can be prepared and even welcome it!

7. When I am anxious and distressed, please be specially quiet and calm. My sensory and movement disorders can prevent me from coordinating my various senses including balance and direction. Bathing my temples and wrists with a cold cloth, drinks of warm herbal tea or cold water, soothing classical music, an extra brushing routine, a long warm bath with Epsom salts, resting under my weighted blanket—all these can help. Please don't over-react in an emergency such as a seizure. I heal best in sleep and in the calm quiet of my home and garden.

My affirmations help me to balance my moods and feel hope

I composed these affirmations in November 2014. I like to hear them spoken or set to music—at the beginning and end of each day.

Special Place In Nature

I love my green oasis in my garden. I love that it is a serene place. It is a place of many shades of green and it is full of life. My home is a shelter to my garden. I am pleased that the feeling of hopefulness is alive in me as I see the seasons change. I am excited to care for and keep my garden growing.

Love and Acceptance

I feel love and acceptance. I enjoy being in a safe place where I belong and am needed. I appreciate the acceptance I feel for myself. I love feeling good just to be the way I am and be happy about it. I love who I am and feeling like I am a good person. I love that I am fine the way I am. I love living in a green home with green surrounding me. I have lots of friends who care. I deserve to be in a safe place because I am a good person.

Support and Independence

I appreciate that I am important, loved and needed. I love getting the support that I need to help me grow. I love being independent and

having support. I love that I take care of myself. I love that I am inspiring the way I am. I inspire my Bridges friends. I get support from friends.

Trust and Courage

I am excited to be able to face change with courage. I love that I am both brave and safe. I love that I am a courageous leader. I love that I am an inspiration to people. I love that I am okay no matter what.

I enjoy that I have love and trust. I love feeling like I have a warm weighted blanket over me. It comes from inside me and my heart is full of joy. My courage and trust comes from inside my heart. It is the centre of all of me.

I have faced change with courage before. For instance, when I meet new people. I trust when I love. I inspire people when I can communicate even when it is not easy.

My Purpose: A Great Leader

I enjoy being a good example and great leader.

I enjoy encouraging others to be themselves. I enjoy teaching people how to feel love and peace. I love being a leader who helps people to communicate in a way that is loving.

Higher Guidance

I love being connected with my Higher Guidance. I am delighted to experience it as a complete circle that surrounds me with a feeling that protects me and keeps me inside with a safe warm place. I love that it is

bright green and gives me energy. I love that the energy gives me a source of hope to keep going.

Communication

I love that communicating is easy, just like in my oasis where the life there is simple and easy. I love that it is what I want and where I need to be. I love that I feel joy that is full of peacefulness because I am where I need to be. I have great ways to communicate. It is easy to write poems that inspire.

I love that I am love.

I love that I am peaceful.

I love that my mind is calm.

I love that I am me.

Rhythm of Life (cover design) is an abstract painting that shows how my metaphors for rhythm make me feel. In my poems about rhythm, I use the metaphors of river water, heartbeat, encouragers and the strong foundation of a big green house that opens its doors to many who bring me love.

My idea of rhythm is my head and heart working together with my body like a dance. The rhythm is enjoyed like music. The rhythm is from my heart and goes naturally without any effort. This heart is deep inside me with my entire body working together to make everything happen how it should. I am moving all the time because my heart beats all the time.

The rhythm is a tender drumming. I am the drummer. My feet are the drums. This tender drumming feels nice, like my entire body is together and in constant motion. The tender drumming comes from my heartbeat. The love in my heart becomes more natural to share when my life is all beating in rhythm like the gentle drumming. My body, thoughts and ideas move forward. The tender drumming, river water and I all have rhythm. My body moves like the river so it is as natural as my heartbeat. I can move forward. Life is flowing in a rapid current which is going forward. I am the drummer who keeps the beat going. I am a drumming instrument. Good people help me keep this good rhythm. I keep drumming because my heart keeps beating.

The drumming should be like thunder and lightning bolts and the current like waves of water. The pulse of my heart is red and in a stone shape that pulses. Isn't the heart like a stone with sticks coming out of it? My body could be like a green shadow. Yes, the pulsing heart and the lightning legs for drumming. The hug is a circle of different colours like the auras of all my friends. The smile represents all the people I know who cheer me on. It can be vaguely in the shape of a smile. The eyes can be over my shoulder looking out for me.

A smile or a kind word that gently coaxes my brain to get moving covers the face with a big shape of the mouth and the eyes shine. The smile has green and yellow brightness that glows around it. Without touching me, it is like a hug. People I care about smile at me. I feel the smile make me go like a cheer: "Let's go. Andrew, you can do it, my friend." My heart feels love. It is a warm thing. It is a nice and safe place to be me. I give the love back. This love is huge. It explodes all over. It is all the colours.

Other books and resources by or about me

In My Mind: Thoughts and Words of Andrew Bloomfield, 2000-2006 (38 poems), Guelph, 2006.

Creating a Home and Good Life of My Own: Strategies and formal agreements developed by Guelph Services for the Autistic in its role as housing trust. Elizabeth & Gerald Bloomfield, Guelph 2008. *2 ed.* 2012.

Odyssey: ten years of a good whole life in my own home, Guelph, 2008.

Bridges-Over-Barriers: In Our Own Words (book edited by Andrew Bloomfield, and DVD produced with Christine Zorn), Guelph, 2010.

Andrew's Bridges blog andrewsbridges.blogspot.com/

Bridges over barriers in my life with autism (autobiography with more than 50 new poems) Guelph, 2011.

Images in my mind (45 new poems), Guelph, 2013.

Holding in the Storm (book edited by Andrew Bloomfield with DVD of short dramatic film directed by Christine Zorn), Guelph, 2014.

Inquiries about any of the items above may be addressed to Friends of Andrew Bloomfield, C/o Guelph Services for the Autistic, 16 Caribou Crescent, Guelph, ON N1E 1C9, Canada, or by email to ebloomfi@uoguelph.ca

Andrew Bloomfield types to talk. Though he cannot speak with his voice because of severe sensory and movement differences, he is eloquent in poetry and prose. Andrew has led a good whole life in his own Guelph home since 1997. He has pioneered social innovations such as Aroha entities of personal support and founded the Bridges-Over-Barriers group of self-advocates who also type to talk.

Andrew challenges assumptions that people with severe Autism lack intelligence and empathy and thus the capacity for communication or social relationships. His premise: "*Now that it is known, or at least accepted by some, that autistics can communicate, I want to get down to what matters. What matters is that our quality of life depends upon good relationships. I know that most people believe that autistics cannot have real relationships. The truth is that we can if the circumstances are right.*"

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